

Paraprofessionals Plus Adult Education Equals Training for Success

The paraprofessional test preparation plan uses local districts' adult education programs to meet NCLB requirements, improve paraprofessionals' knowledge and skills, raise scores - and even boost morale.

By Cherry Daniel, Ed.D., and Barbara Weston

Since school accountability has become a driving force in public education, the need for all school personnel to significantly improve their professional skills has gained national attention. It has become critical not only for teachers to have the academic and applied skills, but also for their assistants to demonstrate a certain degree of academic proficiency. The latest initiative in the quest for ensuring instructional quality in the classroom is addressed in the No Child Left Behind legislation, where a component specifically addresses and outlines academic/application qualifications for teaching assistants, referred to in the legislation as "paraprofessionals." The duties and responsibilities of the paraprofessional (teaching assistant) have dramatically changed over the last few years. Previously, the paraprofessional collected lunch money, mimeographed skill sheets, graded papers, assisted on field trips, monitored study halls, and assisted in the bus line before and after school.

Now, however, the critical need to significantly improve student achievement has impacted the role of the paraprofessional in the 21st century. Paraprofessionals play an important role in schools, as they can magnify and reinforce a teacher's effect in the classroom, particularly for students who are most in need, as are those in Title 1 schools. Therefore, paraprofessionals must have the appropriate knowledge and ability in instructing students if they are to be truly effective and successful in the classroom environment. Thus, their demonstration of competency in the areas of mathematics, reading/language arts, and writing will ensure academic achievement. According to the No Child Left Behind Act, an instructional Title I paraprofessional must meet one of three requirements to be employed. The paraprofessional must meet one of three qualifications:

- 1) Obtain an associate's degree or higher; or
- 2) Complete two years of course work (SC interprets this as 60 semester hours) at a state, regionally accredited or NCATE-approved institution of higher education; or
- 3) Meet a rigorous standard of quality and demonstrate, through a formal state or local academic assessment,
 - a. Knowledge of and the ability to assist in instructing reading, writing and mathematics; or
 - b. Knowledge of and the ability to assist in instructing reading readiness, writing readiness, or mathematics readiness, as appropriate.

To be newly employed in a Title I school or a Title I targeted assistance program, paraprofessionals must have met one of the above-mentioned requirements. Furthermore, all Title I instructional paraprofessionals, including those

employed before January 8, 2001, must meet one of these requirements by January 8, 2006. Failure for a state to comply with any component of the NCLB legislation will put South Carolina in jeopardy of losing Title I money.

Who is a paraprofessional? Who must be certified?

NCLB defines a paraprofessional carefully. It's someone who:

- provides one-on-one tutoring at a time when the student would not otherwise receive instruction; • assists with classroom management;
- provides instructional assistance in a computer laboratory;
- conducts parental involvement activities;
- provides support in a library or media center; • acts as a translator; or
- provides instructional support services under the direct supervision of a highly-qualified teacher. Individuals who work in food services, cafeteria or playground supervision, personal care services, noninstructional computer assistance, and similar positions are not considered paraprofessionals under Title 1.

All paraprofessionals who are paid with Title I funds must meet the qualifications. And paraprofessionals in all schools that receive Title I funds must meet the qualifications, regardless of the funding source for their positions.

Currently, there are over 7,000 paraprofessionals in South Carolina. Approximately 4,000 of those paraprofessionals assist in Title I schools and will be affected by this law. Due to the time required to earn an associate's degree and the cost associated with postsecondary degrees, a large number of paraprofessionals elect to take the official paraprofessional tests approved by the South Carolina State Board of Education.

To accommodate this option effectively, two tests were used during a two-year pilot period.

Descriptions of the two tests

- ParaPro Test, developed by Educational Testing Service (ETS), is two-thirds content specific and one-third application. If the instructional paraprofessional earns a qualifying score on this test, s/he has met the requirements of NCLB. School districts may also apply to offer the test online to current paraprofessionals and candidates for paraprofessional positions in their school districts. The cost of the ETS ParaPro test is \$40.
- WorkKeys, developed by ACT, tests the paraprofessional in the four areas of mathematics, reading, writing and application. If the paraprofessional earn qualifying score in all four areas, s/he has met the requirements of NCLB. The cost of the WorkKeys test is \$25.

Both the ParaPro and WorkKeys tests assess the paraprofessional in the areas of reading, mathematics, and writing, using a multiple-choice format. Basic math skills included on the tests include rounding and estimating, whole numbers, fractions, decimals, ratios and percents, measurement, basic geometry, basic algebra, and data analysis. Basic reading and writing assessments include reading comprehension, vocabulary, reading strategies, sentence construction, parts of speech, punctuation and capitalization, spelling and word usage, and the writing process. The application portion of the WorkKeys test is actually an instructional survey that is completed by the supervising teachers, and signed off on by the building administrator. The instructional survey is then sent to a national WorkKeys state trainer to be scored.

To assist the school district in administering the tests and preparing paraprofessionals who elect to take either test, the local school district adult education program is responsible for the "ParaPro" Project. The cornerstone of adult education programs is the teaching of basic skills in the academic areas of reading, language arts, mathematics, and writing; therefore, this project is appropriate for adult education program involvement. Quality and cost effectiveness

are assets to the ParaPro Project, for it draws on the existing resources of the local school district's adult education program.

The Para Pro Project

The State Department's Office of Adult Education provides training and technical assistance for local school districts' adult education directors and teachers, to enable them to offer skill-upgrade classes in mathematics, reading, and writing which will prepare paraprofessionals for success on either the ParaPro test or the WorkKeys test. Additionally, the project coordinates with the local technical college system to assist paraprofessionals in matriculating into the technical college system or an institution of higher education. The Paraprofessional Test Preparation Program consists of the following steps:

STEP 1 Administration of a pre-test (TABE) - all teaching assistants take a basic skills (math, reading, and writing) test that will identify math and/or reading deficiencies.

STEP 2 An academic basic skill profile for each paraprofessional assists in targeting appropriate instruction in each of the academic areas of reading/language arts, mathematics, and writing.

STEP 3 Paraprofessional Test Preparation classes are offered at times convenient to paraprofessionals - afternoons, early evenings, Saturdays and/or school district staff development days. Classes are ongoing and extend into the summer months. ParaPro and WorkKeys tests are administered to those who are deemed test ready.

STEP 4 Adult Education programs are responsible for the administration of the official ParaPro Test and/or the WorkKeys Test. Individual scores are reported to the district personnel office.

STEP 5 The Office of Adult Education coordinates with the technical college counselors to provide all paraprofessionals with information regarding the associate degree programs offered at the technical college system and the types of financial aid available.

School districts greatly benefit by minimizing training costs, improving job performance of employees and, above all, increasing student achievement. Elementary and middle school teaching assistants who can demonstrate competency in the academic skills will have a significant impact on student achievement.

State registry

The Division of Teacher Quality maintains a state registry on its website at www.scteachers.org. Title 11 NCLB district contacts and state Adult Education Centers provide information on individuals who have met the requirements for being placed on the registry.

If the paraprofessional passes either test s/he will remain on the State Paraprofessional Registry as long as on-going professional development is evident by documented district records.

Economic impact

Each school district may use funds from their NCLB allocation to help paraprofessionals meet one of the three requirements, if the need is written into their district's NCLB Needs Assessment application, which is submitted annually to the Division of Teacher Quality Title II office. ETS ParaPro test costs \$40 per person and includes an assessment component. ACT's WorkKeys test costs \$25 per person and includes an instructional survey assessment component at the school level.

Preliminary results of the Para Pro Test Prep Program

The Para Pro Test Preparation Program utilizing the local school districts' adult education programs has experienced overwhelming success thus far. During the 2002-03 school year, 2,716 teaching assistants enrolled in the prep classes, with the majority passing the test on their first attempt.

It is increasingly apparent that the test prep program's benefits have exceeded the initial intent, which was to prepare adequately for the test and thus to meet the requirements of the NCLB law. A survey of participants revealed far greater benefits, which test scores simply fail to show. The following survey responses were prevalent:

- A renewed confidence in the academic ability of paraprofessionals to assist students with their class assignments, particularly in the area of math.
 - A strong interest in enrolling in the local technical college or university to pursue a teaching degree.
 - Change from an apprehensive attitude about "returning to school" into a positive and appreciative "can do" attitude.
 - A sincere appreciation towards their school district for effectively mobilizing the existing resources (human resources, adult education and Title I) to help overcome the anxiety of possible job loss.
 - A heightened value in adult educators (directors/teachers) who offered classes at convenient times and accessible locations with emphasis on quality instruction, thus resulting in their students' success.
- Presently, Para Pro classes are being conducted with about 300 participants throughout South Carolina. The classes will continue on an "as needed" basis, particularly focusing on preparing newly-hired district applicants who fill vacancies due to attrition. The tremendous success of this project is directly related to the Herculean efforts of the districts' adult education, human resources, and Title I programs that supported the initiative since its inception.

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